

# The relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour: The mediating effect of conspiracy beliefs

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## Abstract

Endorsement of conspiracy beliefs – associated with lower education level – could have consequences that can take many forms, one of which is non-normative political behaviour. The aim of the study was to examine whether conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality could mediate the relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour. Study sample consisted of 1682 participants (903 women) aged 18–85 years from Slovakia. They answered questions about their beliefs in conspiracies, conspiracy mentality, and possible non-normative political behaviours. Although there was some mediating effect of conspiracy mentality on non-normative political behaviour, the mediating effect of conspiracy beliefs appears to be even stronger in this study.

## 1 Introduction

Conspiracy theories, described as attempts to explain events as the results of secret plots of powerful forces (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994) have always been part of our history and seem to be more prominent in times of social crisis (Douglas et al., 2019), such as recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracies tend to blame political groups for negative political and economic events, which puts to question their legitimacy and, when combined with conspiracy mentality – tendency to see the world as driven by secret plots (Bruder et al., 2013) – can lead to increased non-normative political behaviour (Imhoff et al., 2021). Because research shows that higher education is linked to lower endorsement of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2016), and lower political violence (Østby et al. 2019), the aim of our study was to examine whether conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality can mediate the relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour.

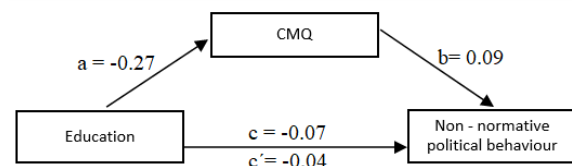
## 2 Methods

A total of 1682 participants (903 women) aged 18–85 years ( $M=46.1$ ,  $SD=16.1$ ) were recruited by the agency

to be representative of Slovak population in terms of age, sex and education completed the online survey (data were collected as the first wave of a larger longitudinal study). Participants answered demographic questions, 18 items of *Scale of Covid-19 unfounded beliefs* (C19-UB; Halama & Teličák 2022;  $M=2.2$ ;  $SD=1.11$ ), *Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire* (CMQ, Bruder et al. 2013;  $M=4.01$ ;  $SD=1.82$ ), and whether they would be willing to engage in some forms of non-normative political behaviour (Imhoff et al., 2021  $M=1.32$ ;  $SD=0.57$ ).

## 3 Results

First, the mediation analysis shows that conspiracy mentality has statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) effect on the relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour (Figure 1, Table 1). Indirect effect explains 37.8 % of the relationship, but direct effect is even stronger (62.2 %) in this analysis.



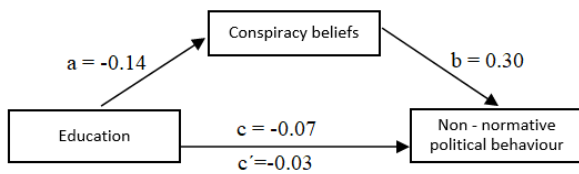
**Figure 1:** Mediation analysis of the relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour.

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p	% Mediation
Indirect	-0.03	0.01	-7.78	< .001	37.8
Direct	-0.04	0.01	-4.98	< .001	62.2
Total	-0.07	0.01	-7.82	< .001	100.0

**Table 1:** Indirect, direct and total effects of mediation analysis between education and non-normative political behaviour.

Secondly, the analysis shows that mediating effect of conspiracy beliefs is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Conspiracy beliefs explain 60.1 % of the relationship

between education and non – normative political behaviour (Figure 2, Table 2).



**Figure 2:** Mediation analysis of the relationship between education and non – normative political behaviour.

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p	% Mediation
Indirect	-0.04	0.01	-9.93	< .001	60.1
Direct	-0.03	0.01	-3.24	0.001	39.9
Total	-0.07	0.01	-7.82	< .001	100.0

**Table 2:** Indirect, direct and total effects of mediation analysis between education and non – normative political behaviour.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore possible mediating effect of conspiracy mentality and conspiracy beliefs on the relationship between education and non-normative political behaviour. As shown by the results, conspiracy mentality can explain 37.8 % of the model's total effect. Conspiracy beliefs proved to be even stronger mediator in this study, explaining 60.1 % of the relationship. These findings are in line with previous studies, that found a relationship between conspiracy beliefs and non – normative political behaviour (e.g. Douglass, 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Our results also suggests that belief in specific conspiracy claims may have stronger effect on non – normative political behaviour than general conspiracy worldview. Future research could investigate whether similar results can be obtained by examining different conspiracies, given that COVID-19 related conspiracy theories were utilized in this study. There is also a question, whether education truly is a predictor in this relationship, or should be considered its different role in this relationship.

## Acknowledgement

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